A STUDY TO DETERMINE THE EFFECTS OF HIRING CIVILIANS TO DELIVER FIRE PREVENTION PROGRAMS

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

BY: Daniel K. McKeen
Port Angeles Fire Department
Port Angeles, Washington

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Abstract

Due to a loss of revenue, the City of Port Angeles gave its Fire Department the challenge of evaluating current staffing at all levels and recommending alternatives to decrease expenditures in the department.

One alternative to the department's current staffing is hiring civilians to deliver fire prevention programs in areas such as inspections, code enforcement, and public education. These areas have traditionally been staffed with uniformed firefighters.

The purpose of this research was to identify potential impacts created by hiring civilians in fire prevention positions and to compare literature findings in this area with information obtained from fire departments within Washington state.

The research method was both historical and descriptive. A standardized survey was mailed to the fire chiefs of twenty-six randomly selected fire departments within Washington State to generate responses to the following three questions:

1. Do significant financial savings result from hiring civilians to deliver fire prevention programs previously delivered by uniformed firefighters?

2. What is the average longevity for civilian staff as compared to uniformed staff?
3. What are the education/training levels of civilian staff versus those of uniformed firefighters?

The results indicated that an increasing number of fire departments are currently hiring civilians to deliver fire prevention programs in areas traditionally staffed with uniformed firefighters. The departments hiring civilians indicated a decrease in wage and benefit expenditures, improved stability in staffing longevity, and increased levels of employee education.

The research recommended that each fire department assess prevention staffing conditions and identify current levels of employee pay, longevity, and education. Then use the assessment as well as the results of this research as a basis for decision making. If hiring civilians will improve the departments efficiency and quality, the department should consider implementation, using a systematic approach that involves employee participation. The change management model taught in the Strategic Management of Change course at the National Fire Academy can provide direction.

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Introduction

In 1996, the Port Angeles Fire Department lost 10% of its operating budget due to the closure of Rayonier, one of the city's largest employers (Dawson, 1996). Due to this loss of revenue, the Fire Department was given the challenge of evaluating current staffing at all levels, and recommending alternatives which would decrease the department's expenditures.

One alternative is the hiring of civilian personnel to fill fire prevention positions which have traditionally been filled by uniformed (firefighters) personnel.

The purpose of this research is to identify the potential impacts created by hiring civilians for fire prevention positions previously filled by uniformed personnel.

The research method was both historical and descriptive to answer the following questions.

1. Do significant financial savings result from hiring civilians to deliver fire prevention programs previously delivered by uniformed firefighters?
2. What is the average longevity for civilian staff as compared to uniformed staff?
3. What are the education/training levels of civilian staff versus those of uniformed firefighters?

Background and Significance

Throughout the history of the Port Angeles Fire Department, positions within Fire Prevention have been filled by uniformed firefighters who took on prevention activities in addition to responding to emergency incidents. In the early 1960s, the Assistant Fire Chief headed the department's prevention programs, inspecting large commercial occupancies and delegating public education assignments to shift personnel.

As the sophistication of fire codes and related technologies increased, the Assistant Chief found he could no longer spend the time necessary to maintain proficiency in this rapidly changing field. To address the problem, in 1970 the department created a full time Captain-Inspector position responsible for the oversight of both fire prevention and fire investigation activities. The Captain-Inspector was selected from the department's existing firefighters through a Civil Service fire officers examination. The Captain-Inspector was eventually reclassified as Fire Marshal (G. Braun, personal interview, March 14, 1998).

Building and fire codes continued to expand, with an increased emphasis on required fire suppression and detection systems. This produced more plan reviews and system

inspections, requiring more of the Fire Marshal's time. Fire suppression personnel were also experiencing an increase in code enforcement and public education activities generated by the Fire Marshal.

Recognizing the increased time demands placed on the Fire Marshal, along with shift personnel, the department added a full time position within the fire prevention bureau in the mid-1980s. The position, Fire Prevention Specialist, worked directly under the Fire Marshal to assist with inspections and public education. The fire prevention specialist was selected from firefighters showing interest in the position and was appointed by the Fire Chief.

Through aggressive prevention efforts, the City of Port Angeles enjoyed one of the lowest annual fire losses experienced by cities throughout the State of Washington (Washington State Patrol & Washington State Association of Fire Chiefs, 1995 and 1996).

Within the last two years, the Fire Prevention Bureau experienced staffing problems and severe budget reductions. In 1996, the fire prevention specialist transferred back to 24-hour shift work as the result of a promotion. The vacated position was opened to those interested within the department. After two months with no demonstrated interest, the position

was filled with the department's least senior firefighter. It became apparent that most, if not all 24-hour shift firefighters did not elect to transfer to 8-hour work days.

The fire prevention specialist is a two-year appointment, after which the prevention specialist can transfer back to 24-hour shift work. Fire department administration quickly realized that the position would rotate every two years, not allowing the specialist adequate time to mature and become proficient in inspections and public education.

In 1997, the Prevention Bureau took an even larger step backward as the Bureau lost the fire prevention specialist position through a department reorganization. This reorganization was prompted by budget reductions due to the closure of Rayonier, one of the city's largest employers (Dawson, 1996).

In order to meet the challenges brought on by internal and external influences, the Fire Prevention Bureau is looking at innovative methods of accomplishing its mission.

This research relates to modules covered in the Strategic Management of Change course as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy. The modules, Introduction to Change Management and the Change Management

Model, were used as a basis for the research project (National Fire Academy, 1996).

It is the author's intent, through this research, to provide the Port Angeles Fire Department with information to assist in planning transformational changes within the Fire Prevention Bureau. The information obtained from other fire departments will be useful in formulating this plan for change.

Literature Review

Both historical and descriptive literature reviews provided findings which led to the accomplishment of this project.

Financial Impact

In 1973, the National Commission of Fire Prevention and Control gave a top priority to increase prevention efforts, with the goal of reducing the nation's fire loss (Cote and Bugbee, 1995). Since then, most fire service administrators have agreed that the best method for decreasing the number of fires is through the prevention of fires. Even with this emphasis, most fire departments routinely spend a fraction of

their budget on prevention, with the majority going towards suppression (Ryness, 1987).

Today when communities experience an economic downturn, there is often a reduction in fire prevention efforts. Some prevention programs may experience cut backs while other programs may be eliminated altogether (Grant and Hoover, 1994). This was recently the case in Port Angeles as the department lost its fire prevention specialist.

Financial hardship for many of today's fire departments is likely to continue as long as communities are unwilling to pay more for government services, as demonstrated by the current trend of resisting tax increases (Osborne Gaebler, 1992). This financial trend can present a challenge to today's executive fire officers who are expected to provide an appropriate level of prevention targeted at saving lives and property, while at the same time they are experiencing diminishing resources.

One way the departments have reduced costs and maintained services is the hiring of civilians to fill positions in fire prevention which have traditionally been filled by more expensive uniformed personnel. In San Diego, California, civilian fire inspectors saved the city 20% in benefits, with

Orlando, Florida, indicating a similar savings through the hiring of civilian fire inspectors (Scott, 1997).

Longevity

The literature review supports the idea that the problem of attracting and retaining qualified personnel in fire prevention is not unique to Port Angeles, but a problem which exists in many fire departments.

In a 1990 report for the Executive Fire Officer Program, David Girder conducted a survey involving 15 major fire departments across the United States. The survey indicated most fire departments that use only uniformed personnel in prevention have a difficult time filling vacated positions. Girder reported that one of the most common reasons for this difficulty is that the suppression shifts work hours are too desirable to give up by transferring to prevention. This often leads to the least senior firefighter reluctantly filling the prevention position, occasionally right out of recruit training. In a 1997 project for the Executive Fire Officer Program, David Costa reported similar findings identifying difficulty in attracting personnel to positions in fire prevention as a significant problem.

If a prevention program is to be successful, employees should have a desire to work there. High turnover due to lack

of interest can adversely affect an otherwise successful program (Corbett, 1990).

Education

As the complexity of our environment changes, so do the sophistication and the systems used to detect and prevent fires. With this sophistication comes the need to educate our prevention personnel to a level above that of the average firefighter (Scott, 1997). The Standard for Professional Qualifications for Fire Inspector reinforces the importance of minimum educational qualifications by stating “The fire inspector at all levels of progression shall remain current with inspection methodology, fire protection methodology, and applicable codes and standards by attending workshops and seminars or by means of professional publications and journals” (NFPA 1031, 1993 p. 1031-5.)

As the complexity of technology and codes continues to increase, the disparity in the level of training for prevention personnel expands. In a 1989 report for the Executive Fire Officer Program, Allen MacAllaster reported that the majority of the department’s surveyed required no formal training for fire prevention personnel prior to assignment. Similar results were reported by David Grider in a 1990 report for the Executive Fire Officer Program in which

the majority of the department's surveyed also required no formal staff training prior to assignment in fire prevention.

Uniformed prevention personnel who routinely respond to emergency incidents face additional mandatory annual training requirements. These include, but are not limited to, specialized training in suppression, emergency medical services, hazardous materials and confined space rescue. This training can place severe time restraints on personnel (Nielsen, 1990).

Bruce Hiesley, instructor in charge of fire prevention programs at the National Fire Academy, refers to the disparity in training for prevention personnel and states "Complex decisions are being made by people with little or no training and possibly no understanding of the implications of those decisions." Hiesley goes on to say "it's a big problem" (Scott 1997, p. 87).

Procedures

Introduction

A standardized survey (Appendix B), along with the cover letter (Appendix A), was mailed to the fire chiefs of twenty-six fire departments within Washington state. A mailing list was obtained from the 1998 Washington State Fire Service Directory. The survey is outlined below.

Fire Prevention Survey

The Fire Prevention Survey (Appendix B) contains the following:

Survey Question 1 asked the Fire Chief the name of the fire department. *This question was used to determine which surveys were not returned in order to do follow-up after the initial deadline.*

Survey Question 2 asked the Fire Chief the population served by the fire department. *This question was used for correlation data for survey questions 4 and 5.*

Survey Question 3 asked the Fire Chief the number of employees hired by the fire department. *This question was used for comparison data for survey question 4.*

Survey Question 4 asked the Fire Chief how many employees are assigned to fire prevention. Survey Question 5 asked the

Fire Chief to indicate the number of prevention personnel who are uniformed, and the number who are civilian. Survey Question 6 asked the Fire Chief to indicate the primary areas of responsibilities for civilian personnel, if used. *Each of the above questions was used to determine a base line for discussion of possible interrelationships of data obtained from the survey.*

Survey Question 7 asked the Fire Chief to indicate the top-step pay of each uniformed classification assigned to fire prevention. Survey Question 8 asked the Fire Chief to indicate the top-step pay of each civilian classification assigned to fire prevention. *The above questions were used to determine if a difference exists between the average pay of uniformed personnel assigned to fire prevention than that of civilian personnel.*

Survey Question 9 asked the Fire Chief to indicate the average number of years a uniformed employee remains in fire prevention. Survey Question 10 asked the Fire Chief the average number of years a civilian employee remains in fire prevention. *The above questions were used to determine if a difference exists between the average number of years a*

uniformed employee remains in prevention as compared to a civilian employee.

Survey Question 11 asked the Fire Chief to list the certifications required for uniformed prevention personnel and if applicable, civilian personnel. *This question was used to determine if higher expectations exist for the required training of uniformed prevention personnel as compared to civilian prevention personnel.*

Of the twenty-six fire departments surveyed, 77 percent responded by the March 20 deadline, with an additional group responding by telephone call and FAX, resulting in 88 percent response by March 30.

Frequencies and percentages were used to characterize responses to the questions and the survey.

The results acknowledged specific assumptions and limitations. For example, it was assumed that the Fire Chief, or designee, was knowledgeable in the areas relating to the survey. The survey consists of a random sampling of municipal fire departments in Washington State serving a population base of 15,000 and greater. The results are not necessarily representative of the fire service in general.

Results

Of the fire departments responding to the survey (n=23), 96 percent (n=22) assigned employees to fire prevention, with the majority (48 percent) of the departments indicating they assigned only uniformed personnel to prevention as identified in Table I. 35 percent of the departments indicated they used a combination of uniformed and civilian personnel in prevention with only 13 percent of the departments indicating they used only civilian personnel in prevention.

Table 1

Classifications of Prevention Personnel

Fire Department Response (n=23)	f	P
Combination Uniformed/Civilian	8	35
Uniformed Only	11	48
Civilian Only	3	13
No Personnel in Prevention	1	4

Note. *f = frequency; P = percentages*

Fire Departments using a combination of uniformed and civilian personnel were able to staff more prevention positions per 1,000 population than all other personnel classifications as shown in Figure 1. Those departments only using uniformed personnel in prevention were near comparable

in positions per 1,000 population, with departments only using civilians significantly behind in comparable staffing.

When comparing prevention staffing by uniformed and/or civilian personnel per population served with total department staffing per population served, a noticeable similarity was observed. This similarity is illustrated in Figure 1.

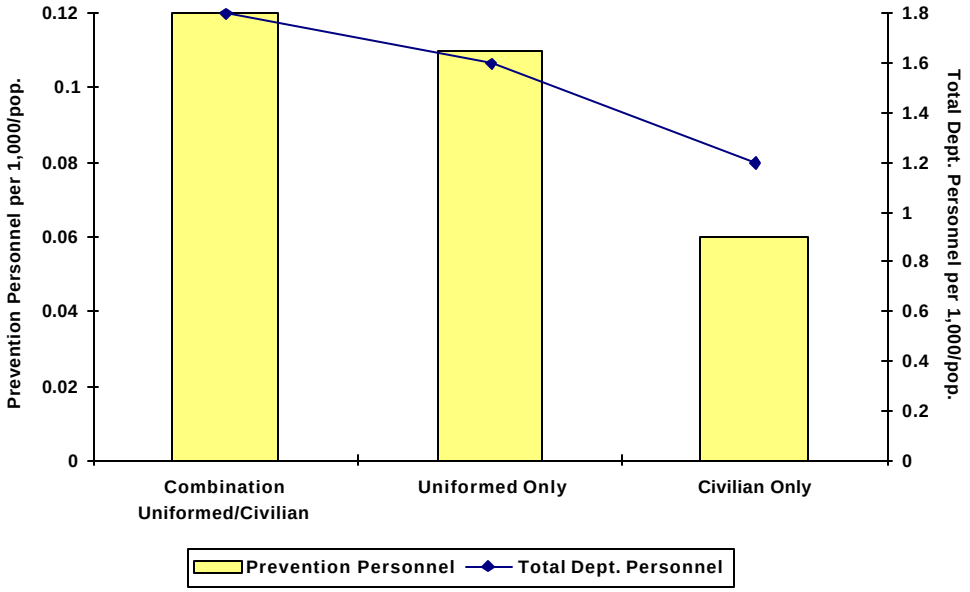

Figure 1. Number of prevention personnel based upon department classification.

Of the fire departments responding to the survey (n=23), 48 percent hired civilian personnel to staff positions within fire prevention. The responsibilities for civilian employees are distributed as indicated in Table 2. The majority (82 percent) of the fire departments identified plan review and

public education as civilian employee responsibilities, with code enforcement a responsibility for nearly one-half and fire/arson investigation a responsibility for nearly one-third of all civilian employees assigned to fire prevention. Forty-five percent of the departments hiring civilians in prevention identified other responsibilities which included staff support and special programs.

Table 2

Areas of Responsibility for Civilian Personnel

Fire Department Response (n=11)	f	P
Plan Review	9	82
Code Enforcement	5	45
Public Education	9	82
Fire/Arson Investigation	4	36
Other	5	45

Note. Respondents were asked to check all that apply. f = frequency; P = percentages

The comparison between uniformed and civilian employees top-step monthly salary is shown in Figure 2. Figure 2 reveals a significant (22 percent) difference in pay for that of a uniformed inspector over that of a civilian inspector. The figure also indicates a substantial (15 percent) difference in pay for that of a uniformed supervisor (captain) over that of a civilian supervisor (fire protection engineer).

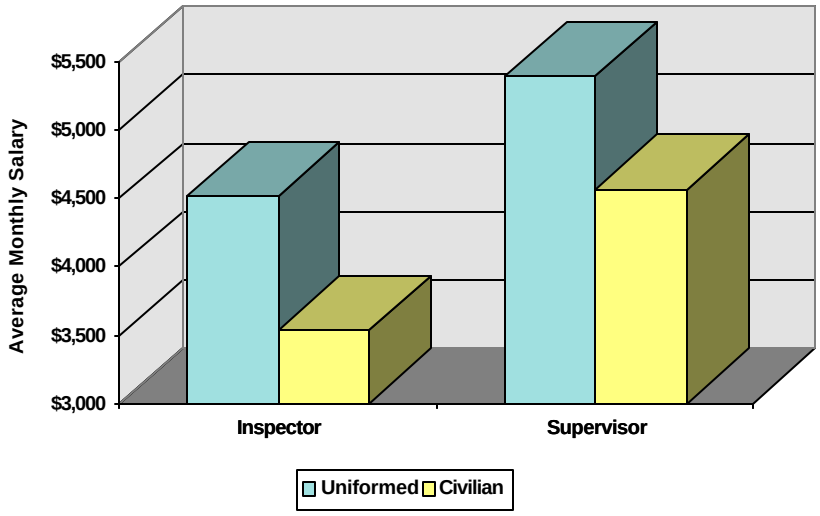

Figure 2. Average base salary of prevention classifications

The average number of years a uniformed or civilian employee remains in fire prevention is shown in Table 3. Table 3 reveals that the average (mode) civilian employee remains in fire prevention for over ten years while uniformed employees average (trimodal) between 0-2 years to over ten years. It is important to note that two respondents stated they expect the longevity in prevention to increase due to the recent hiring of civilians by the department.

Table 3

Average Years an Employee Remains in Prevention

	Fire Department Response (n=22)					
Classification	0-2 years	2-4 years	4-6 years	6-8 years	8-10 years	10 + years
Uniformed	4	1	4	3	0	4
Civilian	0	0	0	3	0	6

Note. Respondents were asked to check each classification that applied.

The results of the survey revealed that three-fourths of all civilian employees assigned to fire prevention are required to obtain a recognized certification, while only one-half of all uniformed employees assigned to fire prevention are required to obtain a recognized certification. Several of the respondents indicated multiple certification requirements for civilian employees, with only one respondent indicating multiple certification requirements for uniformed employees.

Discussion

Financial

The research and literature revealed comparative findings relative to the financial benefit of hiring civilian personnel in lieu of uniformed personnel in fire prevention. Figure 2 indicated a larger financial savings through the hiring of civilian inspectors than civilian supervisors. The smaller savings associated with civilian supervisors suggests that increased educational requirements for a civilian supervisor resulted in compensation closer to that of a uniformed officers position.

The literature review was silent as to the percentage of fire departments that use civilians in prevention. The author

was surprised to find a significant number of departments hiring civilians for fire prevention activities as shown in Table 1. The research distinctly indicates that a correlation exists between the number of prevention personnel, regardless of classification, and the number of total department personnel per 1,000 population. This is consistent with the literature review which reported that most departments spend only a small portion of their budget on prevention, with a much larger portion of spending on suppression. As departments are able to spend more on prevention, they routinely spend an even larger portion on suppression as shown in Figure 1.

Using the survey results, the Port Angeles Fire Department is significantly under-staffed in the are of prevention even though the department attempts to support all the prevention activities outlined in Table 2. Through the hiring of civilians, the prevention division could expect to save over 20 percent in wages and benefits.

Longevity

The research clearly supported the literature review by indicating that an average civilian employee remains in prevention much longer than a uniformed employee as shown on Table 3.

It is essential for an employer to keep an employee in fire prevention for a reasonable length of time, as it takes a significant amount of time, money, and training for an employee to become proficient. A high turnover of personnel in prevention can severely hamper a department's otherwise effective efforts towards reducing fire loss (Corbet, 1990). Through the use of civilian personnel, a department can add stability to fire prevention, allowing employees to become more proficient in this highly technological field.

Although the need to decrease department expenditures prompted this research, the author soon realized that the benefit of longer staff tenure in prevention went beyond the financial benefit. Other departments also recognized the importance of stability in staffing prevention as this was their primary motivation for hiring civilians in prevention.

The Port Angeles Fire Department has experienced similar problems in attracting and retaining personnel as other departments identified in the research. Through the hiring of civilians, the Port Angeles Fire Department could expect to see a significant increase in employee longevity within prevention.

Education

The responsibilities of fire prevention personnel have expanded well beyond basic fire inspections as shown in Table 2. As prevention responsibilities have expanded, so has the related technology and the needed education, as identified in the literature review.

Even with the need for extensive education, the literature review and research revealed a serious education deficiency as a significant number of employees assigned to fire prevention are not required to obtain any related certifications. This lack of education for fire prevention personnel suggests a less effective bureau, often leading to a departments inability to achieve a reduction in fires through competent plan reviews, code enforcement, and public education programs. The lack of required education is mirrored in the Port Angeles Fire Department, as positions within prevention, other than that of fire marshal, are not required to prove proficiency by obtaining related certifications.

The research indicated that the majority of departments which hire civilian personnel in prevention do require related certifications. Some departments have expanded their education requirements for civilians, hiring fire protection engineers to provide technical assistance on more complicated projects.

The Port Angeles Fire Department could be more successful in adopting educational requirements for fire prevention personnel by hiring civilian personnel, as uniformed personnel may not be motivated beyond the required suppression and EMS training due to their short tenure in prevention.

Summary

An increasing number of fire departments have broken tradition and hired civilians in fire prevention, a division previously staffed by uniformed personnel. Both the literature review and research support the use of civilians in fire prevention by indicating:

- A decrease in wage and benefit expenditures
- Improved stability in staffing
- Increased employee educational requirements

Recommendations

The research was not intended to determine if a fire department should implement the hiring of civilians in fire prevention, but rather intended to identify potential effects of hiring civilians. Each fire department needs to determine whether hiring civilians would be appropriate based upon their own organizational needs assessment. Then use the assessment

and the results of this research as a basis for decision making.

Based upon the information gained from the research, the author recommends the following:

1. Assess prevention staffing conditions, comparing current levels of employee pay, longevity, and education with the results of the research.
2. If the hiring of civilians in fire prevention can improve the bureau’s efficiency and quality, assess the effects, if any, this would have on the operation of emergency services.
3. Use a systemic approach that involves employee participation if hiring civilians in fire prevention is being considered for implementation. The change management model taught in the Strategic Management of Change Course at the National Fire Academy can provide a chief officer the direction needed for managing change (National Fire Academy, 1996). The goal is to implement change while maintaining or even improving employee morale.

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Appendix A

Survey Cover Letter

CITY OF PORT ANGELES

FIRE DEPARTMENT

102 East Fifth Street
Phone (360) 417-4655
Fax (360) 417-4659
Port Angeles, Washington 98362
E-mail pafire@ci.port-angeles.wa.us

March 5, 1998

Fire Department
Chief
Address
City, State, Zip

Dear Chief,

I am currently participating in the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program. This program requires the completion of a comprehensive research project on an issue which affects the community I serve, along with the fire service.

As a research topic, I chose to study the impacts created by using civilians for fire inspections, code enforcement, and public education within the fire service. This topic was chosen as our department is experiencing budget reductions, a familiar trend experienced by many jurisdictions.

Even though civilianization of positions within fire prevention is usually driven by budgetary considerations, the issue of attrition, and related problems, also prompted this research.

To complete my research, I have attached a survey. **Could you please take a few minutes to complete the form and fax it no later than March 20, 1998.** The fax number is 360-417-4659.

Thank you for your time and assistance. Your participation will help in providing more informed decisions as departments look at non-traditional methods of delivering fire prevention programs.

If you have any questions, you can contact me at 360-417-4653

Sincerely

Dan McKeen, Fire Marshal
Port Angeles Fire Department

DM/cw
Attachments

Appendix B

Fire Prevention Survey

Fire Prevention Questionnaire

Please check the appropriate response or fill in the blank for each of the following questions.

1. Please indicate the name of your fire department

_____

2. What is the population served by your fire department?

3. How many employees are hired by the fire department?

4. Of those employees hired by the fire department (questions #3), many are assigned to fire prevention?

5 Of those employees assigned to fire prevention (question #4), many are:

Uniform personnel

Civilian personnel

6. If civilian personnel are used, indicate their primary areas of responsibility (check all that apply).

- ☐ Plan review
- ☐ Code enforcement (inspections)
- ☐ Public education
- ☐ Fire/arson investigation
- ☐ Other, please describe _____

7 Indicate top-step pay * of each uniformed classification other than chief officers, assigned to fire prevention.

Firefighter

Fire Lieutenant

Fire Captain

* add incentive pay if applicable

8 Indicate top-step pay * of each civilian position most closely related to the following:

Inspector

Public Education specialist

Fire protection engineer

Other, please describe _____

* add incentive pay if applicable

9. Indicate the average number of years a uniform employee remains in five prevention, other than a chief officer.

- ☐ 0 - 2 years
- ☐ 2 - 4 years
- ☐ 4 - 6 years
- ☐ 6 - 8 years
- ☐ 8 - 10 years
- ☐ 10 years and up

10 Indicate the average number of years a civilian employee remains in fire prevention.

- ☐ 0 - 2 years
- ☐ 2 - 4 years
- ☐ 4 - 6 years
- ☐ Not applicable
- ☐ 6 - 8 years
- ☐ 8 - 10 years
- ☐ 10 years and up

11 Are the following assigned fire prevention personnel required to receive any certifications from a recognized agency?

Uniformed
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, list certifications

_____

Civilian (if applicable)
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, list certifications

_____

- -

Individual completing survey

Name _____ Telephone #_____

Please FAX this survey questionnaire by **March 27, 1998** to Dan McKeen Port Angeles Fire Department. **FAX to 360-417-4659.**